

VZCZCXRO8263  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #0562/01 1391603  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 191603Z MAY 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4928  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3796  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000562

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON  
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT  
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NASRALLAH SPEECHES COULD HELP MARCH 14  
GEAGEA SAYS

REF: A. BEIRUT 00547

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 00537

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) March 14 Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, in a May 19 meeting with the Ambassador, was optimistic about March 14's chances in upcoming parliamentary elections. He noted that coalition leaders had agreed upon lists in all but one district, Beirut 1. Discussing Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah's recent speech praising the violent events of May 2008, Geagea assessed that the opposition would lose some Christian support because of Nasrallah's remarks, which he called "horrendous." On a positive note, however, such inflammatory Hizballah statements would help push March 14 unity, Geagea said. He expressed concern about violence in the run-up to elections and after, and also remarked that cabinet formation would be trying. According to Geagea, President Sleiman could do more to help March 14 candidates, especially in Kserwan and Jbeil. End summary.

ONE DISTRICT LEFT

[1](#)2. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador May 19, eighteen days before the June 7 parliamentary elections, March 14 Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea, accompanied by his advisor Elie Khoury, said candidate lists in all but one district, Beirut 1, were settled. May 18 Geagea had given March 14 Sunni leader Saad Hariri a "balanced, practical, pragmatic" offer on the district and was waiting for a response from Hariri. The deal could be done "within days," Geagea assessed. (Note: Hariri told the Ambassador May 14 that Geagea agreed to remove his Armenian candidate from Beirut 1, about whom many have complained, if Hariri replaced his Greek Orthodox candidate in Akkar with an LF candidate. Hariri adamantly refused this arrangement --Ref A. End note.)

[1](#)3. (C) Geagea expressed concern that Hariri had adopted a delay tactic on the issue of Beirut 1 in order to pressure Geagea to accept the removal of the LF Armenian candidate from the Beirut 1 list without compensating him elsewhere. Hariri and Geagea met frequently, Geagea said, and spoke on

the phone nearly every day. In Geagea's opinion, however, Hariri was "greedy." Being transparent and open with the Sunni leader would have left Geagea without a single candidate, he opined. Geagea told the Ambassador that no March 14 unified coalition event would be held until the candidate list for Beirut 1 was complete.

¶4. (C) Geagea commented that the March 14 list for Zahle, after "huge efforts," was a success. When queried by the Ambassador about how firm March 14 lists were, Geagea insisted that once a list was formed, it could not be broken (although, according to Hariri, Geagea is trying to rearrange the already-settled list in Akkar as part of his Beirut 1 deal -- Ref A.)

SPEECHES PAINT OPPOSITION  
AS DESPERATE AND DANGEROUS  
-----

¶5. (C) Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's May 15 and 18 speeches praised the May 2008 Hizballah takeover of Beirut and promised Hizballah would take "precautions" during upcoming Israeli border exercises. Nasrallah had been full of "furious words," Geagea said. Nasrallah's statements about "erasing the mistakes" that March 14 had committed over the past four years were evidence, according to Geagea, that the opposition insisted on taking control of the country, "one way or another." Nasrallah's tone was more fiery than that of Hizballah MPs in their recent speeches, Geagea noted; he feared the group supported the substance of Nasrallah's comments and was prepared to fight to power. (Note: Reactions to Nasrallah's speeches reported septel. End note.)

BEIRUT 00000562 002 OF 003

¶6. (C) Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun had also lost support as a result of Nasrallah's speech, in Geagea's opinion. Nasrallah's speech had raised fears in Christian communities, some of which were overrun by Hizballah fighters in May 2008. Christian concerns, as a result of these speeches, would affect elections, Geagea said. Aoun's statements and gestures proved he was "losing and nervous," Geagea assessed. Although Aoun did not have the means for violence in the case of an unfavorable electoral outcome for the opposition, his allies did, Geagea opined.

BUT RHETORIC MAY HELP  
MARCH 14 COHESION  
-----

¶7. (C) Discussing the possibility that both the March 14 and March 8 coalitions could splinter following the elections, Geagea argued that Hizballah, especially with Nasrallah's recent fiery words, would provide March 14 leaders with strong motivation to maintain unity; they would stay unified against such "horrendous" rhetoric, he assessed. Khoury offered hope that Nasrallah would give another similar speech closer to elections. (Note: Khoury may have his wish, as Nasrallah, who has sharply picked up the frequency of his speeches, is scheduled to speak again on May 22 and 25. End note.) Geagea said he had told Hariri that "Nasrallah may help us win despite ourselves."

MARCH 14 SHOULD  
STAY STEADY  
-----

¶8. (C) Because the opposition would be unable to win the elections through violence, Geagea assessed March 14's best tactic would be to remain steady in the face of any violence, verbal or otherwise. Geagea expressed concern about violence in the run-up to elections and the days following the vote, especially if the opposition lost on June 7. Hariri did not share Geagea's concerns, Geagea said; Hariri described recent incidents of violence as "bubbles," not indications of more serious trouble to come. Geagea noted that several districts

where Hariri was active, including West Bekaa and Beirut, were potential hot spots.

¶9. (C) Geagea expressed confidence that March 14 would win on June 7. The race would be close, he offered, but March 14 would maintain its majority. Expatriate voters would be mostly insignificant, except for the expatriate Armenian vote in Beirut 1 and Metn. In Beirut 1, March 14 enjoyed about a 1000-vote lead, Geagea said, but a significant expatriate Lebanese-Armenian turnout could tip the balance for March 8. Geagea told the Ambassador that he had commissioned two polls in the Metn that had concluded exact opposite results. He thought expatriate Lebanese-Armenian voters could have an impact in Metn also. Despite these mixed signals, Geagea said the March 14 LF, Kataeb, and Murr political machines were working together well in the district.

¶10. (C) On campaign finances, Geagea was satisfied. He told the Ambassador that things were a "bit better" among March 14 leaders as far as funding was concerned. (Note: Hariri and Druze leader Jumblatt traveled May 9-10 to Saudi Arabia and confirmed to the Ambassador that they had received funding -- Refs A and B. End note) For his part, Geagea said he had his own campaign resources.

SLEIMAN SHOULD COORDINATE  
-----

¶11. (C) President Sleiman could do much to help March 14's chances in Jbeil and Kserwan, Geagea said. According to Geagea, Sleiman should give more support to National Bloc Kserwan candidate Carlos Edde and should push his former aide Nazem Khoury to cooperate with Fares Souaid in Jbeil. Stronger cooperation between the President and March 14 also would strengthen the President's preferred candidates in Jbeil, Geagea emphasized, but Sleiman wanted March 14 support for his candidates without providing his own support to March

BEIRUT 00000562 003 OF 003

14 candidates. Sleiman assumed that March 14 would vote for his candidates because of the coalition's dislike of Aoun alone; this was not a safe assumption, Geagea argued.

¶12. (C) Geagea had been waiting to no avail for a signal from the President about a meeting. Sleiman tried to "outmaneuver" him, Geagea said, by meeting with Hariri, who was "soft," instead of with Geagea. Geagea assessed that the President "wanted a bigger share" but should realize that a president at the same time cannot be a party leader. Sleiman's deputies would be "useless" in the next parliament, according to Geagea. Just as Interior Minister Ziad Baroud is hamstrung as the President's appointee in cabinet, the MPs affiliated with Sleiman would be unable to vote with either March 14 or the opposition in the next parliament.

¶13. (C) Maronite Patriarch Sfeir was "doing good work," Geagea said. The Patriarch had been vocal recently and Geagea noted that for "each team" Aoun proposed, Sfeir had "an antidote."

COMMENT:  
LONG ROAD AHEAD  
-----

¶14. (C) Eighteen days before elections, Geagea came across as optimistic and motivated, if somewhat critical of Hariri. His nominal March 14 ally Amine Gemayel complained to the DCM on May 19 that Geagea was disrupting March 14 agreement on lists for Beirut 1 and another heavily Christian district, Kserwan. Fielding phone calls about the Kserwan issue as he spoke, Gemayel said Geagea is not being "pragmatic", insisting on candidates from his LF party over others who would bring March 14 more votes. The pro-March 14 forces were supposed to announce their lists for Kserwan the same day, but instead had to announce a postponement. End comment.

